



## MARITAL MALADJUSTMENT

### THE BUSINESS OF PREVENTIVE GYNECOLOGY.\*

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IN any consideration of the great increase in nervous break-down among Americans it may be in order for a gynecologist to open the discussion concerning the sex that suffers most, particularly where it is his stubborn conviction that certain things have got to be said, even at some risk. Passing over matters that receive a meed of attention, such as simple living, domestic service, capable midwifery or occupation neuroses, this paper takes up certain important neglected factors in the chronic nervous troubles of women.

If very many mothers subject their daughters to the shock of a first genital hemorrhage, unannounced; if there is rarely any warning concerning self-abuse; if normal curiosity, at proper times, concerning marriage and maternity is evaded; if engaged couples are not guarded; if lack of very simple knowledge on nearly every wedding night leaves blind fear to blundering ignorance; if no single cause of mental strain in married women is as widespread as sex fears and maladjustments, and if the court records show that in most divorces the initial source of friction lies in a real or fancied physical incompatibility—if some of these things are so, then the proper agency for oversight has failed of its duty.

That duty bristles with difficulties and misunderstandings and aversions and false constructions and temptations to evil-mindedness. So, among several teachers, each passes it along to another. Books must not be too explicit, lest they pander to prurency. The unmarried priest is disqualified. The parent and the Christian Association can do much, but not the post-graduate part. The mother, though she warn her daughter of the onset of menstruation and the hygiene of the earlier years, can not be other than vague before the wedding, without implying, "This your father and I experienced." With relative, or friend, or teacher, the conditions are also too close and too personal. It appears, therefore, that in certain matters the only proper, qualified, and impersonal instructor (or director of instruction) is the physician, and he, to qualify entirely, should be clean of mind and happy in his marriage.

Naturally and simply, and in a detached and generalized way, with a set speech to meet the common need, the doctor can save his people from their ignorance. The clean approach is met cleanly. Indeed, the main surprise will be the straightforward naturalness with which the good woman will accept the occasion, unabashed, possessed as she is by the great primal instincts of love and maternity—informed by that "clean elemental consciousness, that

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innocence and purity that invest all processes with holiness and dignity." Directness begets directness, and constraint, constraint. One learns a few simple formulas to use. One also grows alert to apprehend the infrequent resentment or the rarer impossibility of understanding. Thus the need may be met. Thus we take up the unpleasant burden of our responsibility—unless, it may be, we step aside for some wise—and happily married—woman doctor.

One must expect to encounter the life-long habit of reticence. Good people possess no language or terminology either for their feelings or their anatomy. They beat about the bush. They hint or imply. The words may mean much or little, and such statements are liable to all kinds of misconstruction. Even those whose minds are much occupied with wondering or wishing cannot formulate their thoughts. Indeed I have never met utter mental honesty on sex matters. What I know is pieced together from innumerable fragments. What I have learned to dare to say is from those who have come back to urge me to tell others what has been told to them. What I teach is based, each clause of it, on the wreck of some marriage or some mind.

On these matters I speak strongly because I feel strongly. Our high function as confessors and advisers of the saintly half of the race, and the imperative need, at times, of one step within the Holy of Holies is impossible without intimate speech, gentle, reverent, direct. Shall we say to these two, for instance, that a further pregnancy means jeopardy to life or certainty of invalidism, and then, if they are normal in ardent feeling, tell them nothing more? Shall they grope along blindly at the risk of incessant strain on health and nerves and temper, of local disturbances, or even of possibilities of outside temptation, because a doctor has not the courage of his convictions? The man who uses whiskey to save life and mor-

phia to check pain—aware of the hazard of a habit—is he to balk at imparting his knowledge of the means of preventing conception because he fears that it furnishes information giving safety to sexual immorality or immunity to the selfish? The clergyman unites man and wife. It is for us to help to keep them united, inasmuch as the very perfection of union cannot exist without physical harmony. I will yield to no man in raising to the highest plane all exaltation of the spiritual and intellectual sides of love between man and woman. But neither will I suppress frank acknowledgment of my belief in the utterly vital import and breadth and depth of this foundation and base of all that noble building. Smirched and vilified and damned by its abuses, it is for us to see that this holy thing, this sacrament, gets no hurt where it is meet and right—that it becomes no matter of mere shamed acquiescence, but stands in its place as the wonder and the splendor of ultimate intimacy.

The sexual danger zones might be listed for convenience somewhat as follows:

1. Infancy—vulvitis and subpreputial accumulations and the neurotic states that favor friction;
2. After puberty—the four years prone to self-abuse;
3. Business and social life;
4. Engagement—liberties and long duration;
5. Marriage—the beginnings, and the later adjustments;
6. Regulation of pregnancy;
7. Widowhood or neglect;
8. The period of late sexual activity.

The earlier dangers, and the great problems of venereal disease and prostitution, have long been the subject of study. The others have had less frank consideration. In my mind the conviction grows that one of the imperative duties of every practitioner is neglected in most instances, namely:

## INSTRUCTION BEFORE MARRIAGE.

*The Engagement Period.*—With the freedom accorded to young people in this country, an engagement may, at times, present certain dangers. The family doctor who knows his people well may draw a mother's attention to the fact that a long engagement tells on a girl's nervous system. It is a period of unrest and much emotion. It may not be altogether free from other than emotional tension. Often it is the very good girl who has not an idea that normally a physical undercurrent belongs with the spiritual exaltation, or that, under certain conditions, there develops a particular nerve tension, concerning the meaning of which she may be utterly ignorant. On the other hand, in women of consciously strong physical feeling, there is need of especial restraint in demonstration of affection. Reasonably early hours and limitation of caress is expedient in every case. Without the man necessarily knowing it, active sensations have been sometimes developed, and a habit of self-relief has started during the engagement. As an extreme instance, one can report inability, after marriage, to react to the normal embrace, because, during a prolonged engagement, eroticism or orgasm has often occurred, and this imperfect method of relief has settled itself into a habit, and thus that particular individual's mental attitude toward the sex act has set like plaster.

The whole matter should be taken up very carefully wherever one suspects danger. I know few thinner places in the ice.

*Before the Wedding.*—I have said that every clause of the set speech that it has been my custom, for years, to make to the prospective bride and groom, is based on the wreck of the happiness of some marriage. Here is the best I know how to do with two people of average intelligence and morality.

An offer is tendered, directly or through the mother, to give certain

instructions a day or two before the wedding. If a relative or friend known to be judicious and well informed offers to undertake the telling, such a substitute is welcomed. One states that the doctor, or some wise woman physician (whom one names); can best render this most important service. The offer is rarely refused. Then a line is sent to the fiancé asking him to call at the office on an evening shortly before the wedding, in order that he may be separately advised. This is a formula one may use with the woman.

"We physicians are privileged to know, as no one else can, the very inwardness of the very great happiness of many rightly adjusted marriages. And sometimes there is brought to us very bitter trouble from entirely preventable misunderstanding. This is often from lack of the simplest knowledge, or, perhaps, because of some erroneous idea that has gotten fixed in the mind. This is my reason for asking you to come, and for touching on some very intimate matters. When I have finished, will you let me know what I have failed to make clear? You see the doctor can say some generalized things most fittingly, because from him they are impersonal, based on his encountering many people's errors or ignorances. But you will be relieved and surprised to find, as soon as you are married, how natural it will be to speak openly with your husband on matters of which you have never talked, or talked only with difficulty, to any one."

"We must start with a clear understanding that the great elementary physical side of love, so far from having about it anything animal or debasing or self-indulgent, is when used as not abusing it, utterly right—a fair and noble meeting, a sacrament, the intended foundation of the spiritual unity. This ultimate surrender and intimacy is not alone necessary for the perpetuation of the race, but is one of the exalted expressions of love between husband and wife. So much has it been dragged in the mire by

wicked misuse that it is not easy for one to think of it without the good being shadowed by the evil, nor for sweet-minded people to talk cleanly and simply without false shame and hesitations and ambiguous expressions. Do I make this clear? It is, all of it, good and right."

"One of the errors some good women fall into is to think that the gratification is altogether, or largely, on the side of the husband. With this caress it is as with any other caress. To be right, both the desire and the happiness must be mutual. Something is lacking, or as yet undeveloped, or not exactly adjusted, if it is otherwise. It is all wrong if just "submitted to," or "a duty." At first, perhaps, through nervousness and fear and tire and sensitiveness, or from sheer lack of knowing, the wife may be indifferent. But time and tenderness brings all properly. This may not be for days or weeks, or even for months. But harmony must come, or a reason found. Otherwise, you see, a constantly recurring cause of friction exists. This always increases, in time, however considerate the husband is, and we have seen it end in bitterness and estrangement."

"Now at the beginning there *need not be* pain or bleeding or roughness. In your reading (as in the laws of the Jews) you have happened on customs that are archaic and brutal. Let me tell you how a woman is made. At the lower opening of the passage to the womb, the vagina, and only partly closing or screening it, is a structure like a silken curtain, lying in folds, and elastic. This is the maidenhead or hymen. The smallness of its opening was, in olden times, wrongly made a test of virginity. But in size and elasticity it varies so much that this test is absurd. The membrane may be stretched or pushed aside, or it may get a little nick. The development of a man, as to size, astonishes a woman. But do not forget that the structures, male and female, are entirely adapted to each other. What sensitiveness or

smallness or holding shut there is or may be at first, patience and desire and the use of vaseline will overcome. A little distress or a trifling flow will be no harm. But if obstruction persists, an examination is needed."

To a lady longing for children, who is to be trusted with the information, one speaks further: "You are just twenty. I know how eagerly you look forward to a family. But I have been sorry to see you worn out with those abominably elaborate wedding preparations. Your new house is to be fitted out. Wait six months till you are strong and have become adjusted to these new conditions in your husband's family. For the best health of the mother and the children, arrivals should not be haphazard. Regulation of pregnancy is right and wise. Because certain preventive methods are used for vicious license is no reason why they are not right to safeguard health, and just abstinence is not good for either husband or wife."

In this matter of regulation there are two consistent stands—and two only. Either this function is for the purpose of beginning the life of the child, and for nothing else—then the husband's visit will occur about once every two years, and not oftener; or else it is one of the spontaneous expressions of affection. In the latter case the rule will be followed that is found to conduce to health and serenity and better understanding with each particular couple—one a week or oftener. Concerning frequency of intercourse and methods of regulation of pregnancy, however, it is rather better to be specific with the man, but it is desirable to find out whether the wife-to-be has any undue dread of childbirth, such as some tale of horror that is a nightmare to her, and remove it.

Thus a woman starts with a strong mental suggestion in the right direction, on a road where right direction and first impressions may affect an entire lifetime.

The misconceptions to be met with on the part of the man, even the best

educated, are mainly two. First, he utterly lacks understanding of the possible extent of the ignorance of his new partner on sexual matters, and, second, he has the fixed delusion that some barrier must be broken through forcibly, pain and bleeding being necessary and regular. He must be taught the woman's point of view; her difference in training, wherein, if of cultured people, there may never have been mention of the most elemental matters. She may be full of vague terrors, and so ignorant of her own anatomy and his that his size will greatly shock her. Perhaps her mother has said only enough to alarm her, in a tone of anxious apprehension, such as, "Remember to submit to whatever comes," or, as happened in

a different class of society, one of my patients has never gotten over the initial mental attitude toward a rite about which a friend jeered, "Oh, you're going to be murdered to-night, all right!"

Thus we try to make plain to the man that first impressions and the mental attitude toward the early approaches will, possibly, make or mar this relation for the rest of married life. We warn him to forestall apprehension. For instance, her first dread will be undressing. Let him suddenly recall an important note unwritten, which will take him off to the writing room "just fifteen minutes." Let him be wary of exposures, and gentleness itself.

*(To be continued.)*





